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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the U.S. Department of Education's eligibility system and accreditation is discussed by the Secretary of Education, T. H. Bell. Because of the link between eligibility for federal funds and peer evaluation through accreditation, the Department has developed criteria and procedures to determine which national, regional, and specialized accrediting agencies are suitable for inclusion on the Secretary's list of recognized agencies. "Threshold" eligibility refers to the first stage of the Department's two-tier eligibility procedure, wherein institutions or programs are determined to meet statutory requirements concerning eligibility to apply for participation in the assistance programs. Provision is made in the law for special qualifying steps that may be taken as alternatives to accreditation, including the Three Institutional Certification Process. The Secretary is advised by the Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility. A program of periodic evaluation of the recognized agencies is also conducted to determine if they continue to comply with the criteria for recognition. (SW)

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STATEMENT OF

T. H. BELL, SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

Before the

HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

Institutional Accreditation

February 8, 1983

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Secretary Bell is accompanied by:

Dr. Edward Elmendorf, Assistant Secretary
for Postsecondary Education

Mr. Richard J. Rowe, Director, Eligibility
and Agency Evaluation Staff

HE 016 082

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee to discuss the relationship between the Department's eligibility system and accreditation.

The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, currently authorizes a number of programs which support institutions of postsecondary education. Federal funding for these Education Department programs grew to a total of approximately seven billion dollars this past fiscal year, most of which is in the form of student financial assistance.

In order for either institutions or students to participate in these programs of Federal assistance, Congress has set certain standards for institutional eligibility. These are five in number. One of them, and perhaps the linch-pin of the five is - although the statutory language also provides some alternatives - that the institution be accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

It is because of this statutory nexus between eligibility for Federal funds and peer evaluation through accreditation that the Department has developed criteria and procedures to determine which national, regional, and specialized accrediting agencies are suitable for inclusion on the Secretary's list of recognized agencies.

Concern for academic freedom has guided the Department in structuring its system of recognition of accrediting agencies and its reliance on the decisions of these accrediting agencies with respect to eligibility of accredited institutions. The Department exercises its recognition responsibility through the establishment of criteria respecting the accreditation process. Accrediting agencies must be found to be in substantial compliance with these criteria in order to be listed by the Secretary.

These criteria, however, have been developed only through extensive consultation with the higher education community and the National Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility.

A study was conducted by the Educational Testing Service to evaluate the criteria and procedures for recognition to determine their effectiveness in distinguishing agencies that can be relied upon to make judgments concerning educational quality. The study report issued in May 1980 concluded that the Department's procedures reliably differentiate ineffective agencies from effective ones, and our procedures remain stable from year to year in the interpretation and application of criteria.

It is important to note that the Department does not accredit institutions, but the Department does recognize agencies that are reliable authorities. Once recognized by the Department, the accrediting body has significant influence, since the institutions it approves become eligible to apply for participation in federal assistance programs.

Institutions failing to adhere to the standards set by their accrediting bodies lose their eligibility for federal assistance.

Clearly, this process is extremely critical and important to both postsecondary institutions and the federal government.

The concept of accreditation is not new. Accreditation in higher education began with the establishment of regional associations of colleges and secondary schools in the late 1800's. In the early 1900's professional, specialized accrediting activities in fields such as medicine began to be developed. Certain State agencies, such as the New York Board of Regents, also conduct accrediting activities.

Over the past 30 years, the Commissioner and now Secretary of Education have been directed to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting bodies through some 15 pieces of legislation. These are: the Higher Education Act, Vocational Education Act, the Act setting up the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, the Education for the Handicapped Act, Emergency School Aid Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, College Housing Act, Public Health Service Act, Immigration and Nationality Act, Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Act, the Act setting up the educational assistance program for enlisted members of the armed forces, the Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act, State Technical Services Act, Social Security Act, Justice System Improvement Act, and the Depository Library Program.

There are over 40 separate statutory references to the Secretary's list affecting the work of some 10 Federal agencies. For example, over 8,000 of the 9,000 institutions that now hold threshold eligibility status for one or more Higher Education Act programs have met statutory eligibility requirements for accreditation by an agency recognized by the Secretary. "Threshold" eligibility refers to the first stage of the Department's two-tier eligibility procedure, wherein institutions or programs are determined to meet statutory requirements concerning eligibility to apply for participation in the assistance programs.

Provision is made in the law for special qualifying steps that may be taken as alternatives to accreditation. The Three Institutional Certification Process provides eligibility for 50 institutions, for example. State approval by an agency recognized by the Secretary is another alternative open to public postsecondary vocational institutions.

Currently, the Secretary recognizes 77 components of 47 organizations as reliable accrediting bodies. This includes 13 commissions of the six regional associations and 64 other bodies of national scope that can be characterized as institutional, specialized, or a combination of the two. One State agency, the New York State Board of Regents, has been designated by the Secretary as a nationally recognized accrediting body. Seventy of the recognized accrediting components serve a direct Federal funding eligibility purpose. All agencies recognized by the Secretary serve the program approval function specified in the Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952.

It should be emphasized that the commissions of the regional associations and the national accrediting agencies and associations have no legal control over educational institutions or programs. They promulgate standards of quality or criteria of educational excellence and accredit institutions or programs that, upon evaluation, meet the standards or criteria. Accreditation, as practiced in the United States, is largely a means of conducting non-governmental, peer evaluation of educational institutions or programs. The process is voluntary and the personnel services provided during accreditation team visits to campuses are usual unremunerated.

In 1968 the Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility was chartered by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to advise the Commissioner on matters relating to both recognition of accrediting agencies and the Federal eligibility for funding process.

Under the Education Amendments of 1980, the Advisory Committee received statutory authorization as the National Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility. The Committee is composed of 15 persons appointed to three-year terms from various segments of the secondary and postsecondary education communities, the student/youth population, State departments of education, professional associations, and the general public. Supported by the Department's Eligibility and Agency Evaluation Staff, the Committee advises the Secretary concerning:

- the publication of a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations that the Secretary determines to be reliable authority concerning the quality of training offered;

- the criteria and procedures for recognizing accrediting bodies;

- the responsibility to designate State agencies as reliable authorities concerning the approval of public postsecondary vocational education and nurse education; and

- developing and recommending standards and criteria for specific categories of educational institutions for which there are no recognized accrediting bodies or State agencies, in order to establish the eligibility of such institutions on an interim basis for participation in Federally funded programs.

The Secretary's list of recognized accrediting agencies and associations is published periodically in the FEDERAL REGISTER. The Secretary maintains a program of periodic evaluation of the recognized agencies to determine if they continue to comply with the Criteria for Recognition. The recognition process requires the designation of the scope of the recognized activities of each agency or association. If a recognized body expands its activities, and desires recognition for the new areas, it must petition for such recognition—as part of its regular, periodic review, or separately.

The Carnegie Report, Control of the Campus, is timely and contains a number of recommendations that are worthy of our concern over the issues of educational quality and Federal intrusion into academia.

I have invited the National Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility through its chairperson, Dr. Timothy Healy, to carefully analyze the Carnegie report and make recommendations to me concerning any necessary changes to the Department's policies regarding accreditation and institutional eligibility. When the review has been accomplished, I will be pleased to share our findings with this Subcommittee. In addition, I would be pleased to have your comments and be advised of any concerns you wish to share with me regarding the important subject of these hearings. In the meantime, I am pleased to respond to any questions you may have.